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ABSTRACT

Tightened budgets and more decentralized governance of education demand greater effectiveness of state boards of education, departments of education, and chief state school officers, and offer them new opportunities for leadership. State boards have broad authority to make policy, though their significance is often underestimated. Researchers recommend that boards increase their effectiveness by: reducing time spent on administration at the expense of policy questions; lessening dependence on chief school officers and departments of education by increasing budgets for research staff; and gaining influence by more frequent meetings and greater visibility. State departments of education administer policies established elsewhere but shape policy as they implement it. Their future depends on successfully integrating diverse functions into their overall structure, expanding capabilities for policy analysis so that governors and legislators will consult them, and meeting the increased demand for technical assistance to districts. Chief state school officers manage the department of education and represent the interests of education to state government. Suggestions for making the job attractive to more capable candidates include increasing salaries, guaranteeing greater job security, and expanding the chief's authority and responsibilities. (MJL)

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42. Boards, Departments, Chiefs and State Education Policy

The Issue

State budget problems and the changes brought by the "new federalism" and by other moves to decentralize education governance place new demands on state education leaders. Are state boards of education, state departments of education and chief state school officers prepared to assume greater policy leadership? The answer is a tentative "yes," tentative because expanded leadership presents each group with certain problems. Some problems are tied to the ways these groups have organized their efforts; others arise out of the relationships of these groups to others who direct state education policy.

The Context

Other groups besides boards, departments and chiefs shape education policy, sometimes complicating the leadership efforts of individual groups. State legislatures make education policy. Governors interested in education can choose to be strong leaders, by setting up task forces and study commissions, for example, and otherwise playing important roles in shaping policy. Court decisions also affect education policy.

State boards of education illustrate some of the complex interrelationships. Although boards nominally carry primary responsibility for establishing elementary/secondary education policy, they must also carry out policies that legislatures, governors or courts have set. Since board members have many other commitments, they usually spend only 10 to 15 hours a week on board matters. They depend on the chief state school officer, who is a full-time professional, for information and guidance. Chiefs and staff of departments of education influence policy not only through their relationship with board members but also through the day-to-day decisions they make as they administer policies, and through their analyses of policy.

From these complexities arise some of the particular problems -- and opportunities -- that now face boards, departments and chiefs.

State Boards of Education

State boards of education are citizen boards. In most states members are appointed by the governor; in 15 states they are elected. Boards range in size from 3 members to 24; 75% of all board members in the nation are managers and professionals, most are white males between 40 and 60 years old, and most have at least one college degree (Williams, 1981, p. 16).

State boards generally have broad authority to make policy as they supervise schools, reorganize school districts and regulate the administration of education. They often make recommendations to governors and legislatures, especially about financial matters. They establish standards for courses, facilities, transportation, teacher qualifications and other such matters. Some boards are responsible for private, postsecondary and vocational education as well as for public elementary/secondary education.

But even though boards have broad authority, other state policy makers tend not to view them as significant in the policy arena. A former director of the National Association of State Boards of Education has suggested three possible explanations:

> First, they have lost prestige. While state boards once were at or near the center of state education policy making, their position has been increasingly eclipsed by activist state legislatures. . . .

> Second, many state boards have found themselves saddled with mounting administrative responsibilities. More and more often, boards are spending a high percentage of their time on three duties: (1) assuring compliance with mandates issued by the courts, Congress and state legislatures; (2) handling appeals on civil rights questions; and (3) sitting in judgment on personnel issues which cannot be settled locally. . . .
>
> Finally, and most importantly, a large number of boards have found themselves confronting a serious authority crisis. . . . State boards have come under mounting pressure to act on a wide range of policy issues. Yet, at the same time, they are finding it difficult to mobilize effectively. . . . If they defer on important issues, they will eventually be regarded as politically irrelevant. But if they act on issues without adequate support, they not only will be regarded as arbitrary, but also will run the risk of having their decisions countermanded elsewhere (Wilken, 1981, p. 4).

Among the ways to increase the effectiveness of state boards suggested by William Wilken and other education researchers are:

- Reducing the time boards spend on administrative matters. Spending too much time on administration diverts boards from policy questions and forces them to respond to agendas set elsewhere.

- Reducing the dependence of boards on the chief state school officer and the state department of education. A larger budget for hiring staff and consultants would let members acquire their own information on policy alternatives.

- Changing boards' style of operation. If boards met more frequently and sought greater public visibility, they might gain influence. As matters now stand, elections in the 15 states where board members are not appointed are rarely competitive and draw few voters. But more politicization might be one consequence of more visible, active boards.

State Departments of Education

State departments of education have the major responsibility for administering the policies established by other parts of

the system. But to some extent they also make policy. Most departments run bureaus of policy analysis and administrators shape policy as they decide how it will be carried out.

State departments of education now manage much more information and respond to much broader interests than in 1900, when 177 staff members across the country (including chief state school officers) collected a few education statistics. Today, staff members total 36,100, and their responsibilities include monitoring the performance of local disticts, administering complicated federal and state categorical grant programs, and, most recently, providing technical assistance to districts. An important new focus of technical assistance is school improvement: almost all departments now administer at least one school improvement program, and more than half administer six or more programs.

The more active state departments become, the higher the expectations of local districts and the greater their demands. But resources have not kept pace with demands. State funding (which increased in the 1960s and 1970s) is beginning to decline, which means that state departments may not be able to maintain current staffing. Just as important are the effects of federal retrenchment. Title V of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which had been a source of federal support, has now been consolidated into the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act Chapter 2 block grant, for which funding has dropped by 15%. Cutbacks in programs for special students will also affect state department funding (Burnes, Issuegram No. 32, 1983).

The future of state departments of education may depend on the answers to three questions:

- How well have state departments integrated diverse functions, such as information dissemination and technical assistance, into their overall structure?

- If state departments expand their capabilities for policy analysis and become more sophisticated in the policy process, will governors and legislators turn to them for advice and guidance?

- Will the new partnership between state departments and school districts lead to a manageable set of technical assistance activities -- or, espcially since departments face funding problems, will the demand for assistance outstrip the ability to supply it?

Chief State School Officers

Since the chief state school officer not only manages the state department of education but also represents the interests of education and the department to the governor and the legislature, he or she needs multiple talents. According to a former chief, the position calls for someone who is a manager, a politician, a charismatic leader -- and who has strong convictions (Murphy, 1980, p. 131).

In the 31 states where the chief is appointed, there is an emphasis on management, on a chief's ability to contend with the intricacies of the state department of education. In states where chiefs are elected, political savvy is very important. Leadership and convictions are valued in most states, but external factors affect a chief's ability to lead. The strength of the legislature and the state board, the initiative and creativity of the governor, the political strength of various interest groups, and the nature of the state's economy are all key factors.

Improving education in a time of fiscal constraint presents formidable problems for a chief state school officer. For this reason, among others, the chief's job is becoming more difficult, and so is finding the right person to fill it. To attract high caliber leaders, virtually all states have increased salaries for chiefs. In 1978, chiefs in only 7 states earned more than $50,000 a year; today, chiefs in 30 states earn more than that.

Researchers have suggested other ways to make the position of chief state school officer more attractive:

- Lengthening the chief's term of office and eliminating "at the pleasure of" clauses that in many states define tenure. In 21 states, the chief serves less than four years or at the pleasure of the governor or the state board of education. These arrangements may increase "accountability" but they limit job security and the appeal of the position.

- Increasing the authority and responsibilities of the chief. Since chiefs have access to and can influence governors, legislatures, state boards, state departments and the public, giving them greater opportunities for leadership could help the education system respond to its changing environment.

Summary

If state boards of education are to exercise greater policy leadership, they need to shift administrative burdens and otherwise strengthen their participation in the policy-making process. The basic function of state departments of education is implementing policy rather than formulating it, but administrative decisions by departments significantly affect policy. Threatening the ability of departments to lead school improvement efforts and provide other types of technical assistance is the potential imbalance of resources and demands. As being an effective chief state school officer becomes more difficult, hiring competent chiefs becomes more important, which may mean making the position more attractive. Although strong leadership by boards, departments and chiefs could theoretically become too much leadership and lead to conflicts, the more realistic concern is whether these groups can provide enough leadership to guide education through challenging times of limited resources and great expectations.

What to Read

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